

## “A Hairy Tale” (Genesis 36:1-37:1)

What is one of the most fascinating things to do in your spare time? Study your genealogy, of course! While it may not seem like your idea of an evening well spent, there is a growing interest among many people to trace their family lineage, to have a better sense of their own identity, to discover how they fit into the larger picture of human history. For many people, researching their family genealogy is a hobby. For others it is an obsession! In fact, some of the most frequented sites on the Internet today are sites that help people research their family history.

Now I am willing to grant the possibility that studying one’s own genealogy might be an enlightening experience, but studying someone else’s genealogy can be terribly dull and lifeless. Yet, the Bible is full of genealogies. Not only are these genealogies particularly challenging to teach, it is rather tricky just to read them because of all the difficult names. Nevertheless, we are going to study Esau’s genealogy in Genesis 36. Now even if you read your Bible, I’ll bet that Genesis 36 is a chapter you don’t spend much time thinking about. It’s one of those chapters that makes you wonder, if you’re honest, why it’s in the Bible. There are a bunch of names which mean nothing to us and about whom we can learn very little. They lived and died almost 4,000 years ago, linked together with the common thread of being Esau’s descendants. It’s like reading a telephone book in a foreign language. For these reasons, Genesis 36 is one of those texts that most Christians flip past and most pastors refuse to teach. But the fact remains that God considered the genealogy of Esau important enough to include in the canon of Scripture (2 Tim 3:16-17). The question is, “Why?” I would suggest at least four reasons:

- ***To record the fulfillment of God’s promises to Esau.*** Despite the fact that Esau forfeited his birthright and blessing, God ensured that he would have his own identity, nation, and family history (17:5-7). God is a faithful God that can be trusted to keep His promises.
- ***To protect the descendants of Esau.*** The first readers of this chapter were the Israelites who were about to cross over the Jordan River to possess the land of Canaan and to annihilate the Canaanites (Deut 1:8; 20:16-18). There were, however, some people who were not to be attacked or annihilated. Among those whom God protected were a people called the Edomites, the descendants of Esau (Deut 2:2-5). And so, to prevent this command from being violated, it was essential for those Israelites of Moses’ day to know who the Edomites were and to have a carefully documented record of the generations of Esau (i.e., Gen 36).
- ***To prove that the Messiah would come from a particular family.*** The biblical genealogies include some people and eliminate others, ultimately stopping at the only remaining branch of the family of David.<sup>1</sup> This is the family that Jesus was born into. All of the genealogies help include and exclude those who will be a part of His line. Note: In the early first century, no one attempted to deny the claim that Jesus was a descendant of David. There were clear records kept until A.D. 70 and the destruction of Jerusalem. Thus, the foundation stands as sure today.
- ***To remind us that every person counts in God’s eyes.*** Someone else’s genealogy may not be of any interest to you, but to the people and families it represents, it is precious. Each of these names represents the life of a man or woman—individuals made in the image of God who had hopes, dreams, and aspirations just like you and me.<sup>2</sup>

As we reflect on this genealogy, my hope is that you will be challenged to stop and think about the true meaning of life and success. For ***if we succeed by worldly standards, but fail with God, we fail where it really matters.*** Esau and his descendants succeeded in this world but failed terribly in light of eternity. Genesis 36 reveals four principles that we can learn from.

**1. A beautiful and successful family by the world's standards does not equal a family blessed by God (36:1-6, 9-14).**<sup>3</sup> Verse 1 begins with: “Now these are the records of the generations of Esau (that is, Edom).” The name Esau means “Red.” This is a reference and reminder of Esau’s foolish decision to trade the birthright and blessing of his father, Isaac, for a pot of red stew (25:30). Esau was a man that lived for short-term gratification. This led to many mistakes that cost him dearly.

One of the most significant mistakes Esau made is found in 36:2-3. Moses tells us, “**Esau took his wives from the daughters of Canaan**” (36:2a). First, we must notice that Esau took more than one wife. Practically speaking, it should go without saying that this is never a good idea. Besides, we know from our previous studies that this type of arrangement is not God’s will. In the beginning, God called Adam and Eve “man” and “woman” that they might cling to each other. Adam and Eve were a single family unit. There was no Evone, Evette, and Eva Jane...just Eve! Men, God’s design is one woman for one lifetime. You may say, “Listen, I’m not a polygamist. I’m still married to my one wife.” Yet, I would ask: Are you committed to her with your eyes? Or do you have your own visual harem? The Bible calls each of us to be a “one-woman man” (1 Tim 3:2). Whether married or single, God calls you and me to a high level of purity.

In this genealogy, Moses records three of Esau’s wives. Esau’s wives were no doubt beautiful women, as their names indicate.<sup>4</sup> Names weren’t given just because they sounded nice—they had meaning.

- Adah (“ornament,” “the adorned one”),
- Oholibamah (“tent height,” i.e., “tall, stately”),
- Basemath (“the perfumed one”)

Note that each of their names focuses on some outward feature of beauty or sensuality. Esau was plainly a lover of fine women. He chose the most attractive women to marry. Yet, he no doubt learned that there was more to a woman than her looks. Men, I hope we learn that lesson again and again. If you’re single you should look for someone that you’re attracted to, but “gird up your loins” and don’t let them rule you. Look for a woman with a gentle and quiet spirit (1 Pet 3:4). Look for a woman that is spiritually provocative. Married men, this also applies to you. Don’t focus on the weight that your wife has gained. Don’t let her wrinkles and her cellulite bother you. If this is a struggle for you, I have just the remedy...look in the mirror at yourself. I’m sorry, but this cracks me up. Many men complain about their wife’s appearance when they are nothing to look at themselves! Husband, love and nurture your wife.

Most tragically, Esau took his wives from the Canaanites, even though marriage to the Canaanites was strictly forbidden. Esau’s grandfather, Abraham, had gone to great lengths to find a proper wife for Isaac, making his servant, Eliezer, swear that he would not take a wife for Isaac from the Canaanites (24:1-9). But Esau spat upon this when, in open defiance, he took wives from the idolatrous Hittites and brought them to his tents within the camp, where “they made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah” (26:35 NET). Later, still lacking spiritual discernment, he took a wife from the descendants of Ishmael (28:9). A man’s choice in marriage showcases his values and is almost always the determining factor in the trajectory of his own life. Esau made his own bed—for life.<sup>5</sup> Men and women, please choose your future spouse wisely. The Bible is clear that believers are to marry “only in the Lord” (1 Cor 7:39).

From these unions came five sons (36:4-5). Esau’s kids were born leaders—talented and strong. Yet, there is no indication that Esau raised them to know the Lord. In this chapter, there are 81 names listed, yet only two names hint at a belief in the true God: “**Reuel**” (36:4, 10), Esau’s son by Basemath, means “friend of God”; “**Jeush**” (36:5, 14), Oholibamah’s son, means “the Lord helps.” Esau, the grandson of the godly Abraham, the favorite son of peaceful Isaac, was a successful man whose sons and grandsons after him were successful men, by worldly standards. But they all failed at what matters most because they left God out of their lives.

The most important thing you can impart to your kids is not how to be a worldly success. It's easy to encourage our children to succeed in the wrong ways. They may make the football team or be the homecoming queen. They may score well on the SAT and go to the best colleges and get the best paying jobs. But if they fail with God, all that stuff doesn't matter. We need to instill in our children what it means to succeed with God. Dad and Mom, this means that you must encourage your kids spiritually. Do your kids enjoy attending church? Are they involved in youth group? Do they have personal devotions? If so, tell them how proud of them you are. Give them accolades for spiritual desires! Work with your kids on their kids' choir and *Awana* projects. Support them in every way you can with their spiritual endeavors! Look for creative ways that you can stimulate them to love and good deeds (Heb 10:25).

It's significant that there is no mention of barren wives when it comes to Esau's line. Abraham had God's promise of many descendants, but his wife Sarah was barren. Isaac had the same promises, but Rebekah could not conceive for the first 20 years of their marriage. Jacob's favored wife, Rachel, was barren for a long time. But Esau's wives bore him five sons and a number of daughters with no trouble (36:4-6).

Esau represents the natural man—strong, capable, independent, able to cope with life's problems with his own resources. Who needs to depend on God for things when you can take care of it yourself? Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and their barren wives, represent God's way of working. He humbles our pride by shutting us up with problems we are incapable of solving—problems like barren wives in the face of promises to make us into a great nation. Then, when we call on Him, He proves Himself mighty to save. Esau had a beautiful family by the world's standards. But in the end, I'm sure he would have traded it all for a family that was right with God.

**2. Material prosperity does not equal spiritual prosperity (36:6-8).** In 36:6-8, Moses writes about Esau's relocation. **"Then Esau took his wives and his sons and his daughters and all his household, and his livestock and all his cattle and all his goods which he had acquired in the land of Canaan, and went to another land away from his brother Jacob. For their property had become too great for them to live together, and the land where they sojourned could not sustain them because of their livestock. So Esau lived in the hill country of Seir; Esau is Edom."**<sup>6</sup> This account sounds a lot like the episode between Abraham and Lot (13:1-13). Esau had begun to settle among his wives' relations, in Seir, before Jacob came from Padan-aram, but after his father's death, he now makes the move permanent. There are two reasons for this: First, there wasn't sufficient water and pasture for both Esau's and Jacob's flocks and herds. Second, Esau had finally come to accept that the promised land of Canaan that God had covenanted to Abraham was to be passed on to Jacob.

Esau had become a very gracious man. At one time he had threatened to kill his brother for his deception, but now when their mutual prosperity necessitated it, he graciously moved out of his brother's way. It was nice of Esau to be so agreeable. But, sadly, he had no vision for God's promises to Abraham concerning Canaan. Ever since God called Abraham, He repeatedly emphasized Canaan as the land He would give to Abraham's descendants. But for Esau, any nice land would do. He had no spiritual vision. He was living for himself, not for God's purpose. He was materially rich, but spiritually poor.

To his credit, Esau was not greedy. When he saw Jacob, after their 20 years apart, he declined Jacob's gift by saying, "I have plenty, my brother. Keep your things." But it's possible to be generous, contented people, but still to be living for material possessions, not for God. The danger is that our material prosperity dulls our senses with regard to our desperate need for God. The Lord warned the church in Laodicea, "... you say, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked" (Rev 3:17). We American Christians, who have been so blessed materially, need to be careful to become rich toward God by laying up treasures in heaven (Luke 12:13-34).

**3. Political power does not equal power with God (36:15-43).** Esau and his descendants were men of great political power. They are called “chiefs” (36:15 ff.; 40 ff.) and “kings” (36:31 ff.). These men reigned as kings in Edom before any king reigned in Israel (36:31).<sup>7</sup> Esau’s sons, who walked away from God, had the distinction of being kings long before Jacob’s sons to whom it was promised. While Esau’s sons and grandsons would become rulers, Jacob’s sons remained lowly shepherds for generations (47:3). Esau’s sons could have looked at Jacob’s sons and scoffed, “Where is your God and His promises?”

Isn’t that how it often seems—that the world is winning, while God’s people are losing? We’ll reign with Christ someday, but meanwhile the church is often persecuted and disregarded by powerful, political leaders who laugh at God. But we need to remember that political power and power with God are two different things. The world may boast now in its political power, but He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord scoffs at them (Ps 2:4). It is the Lord who “removes kings and establishes kings” (Dan 2:21). While it is fine for Christian people to be involved in politics, we need to keep things in perspective. Political power is always subject to Him who is “ruler over the realm of mankind,” who “bestows it on whom He wishes” (Dan 4:17). True power is having power with God. In the short-term, the Edomites became chiefs and kings in this world, but in the long-term, Jacob’s descendents would become kings and priests of the most high God. It is so important for you and me to have patience to wait on the fulfillment of God’s program.

Esau’s kingdom, Edom, later caused great trouble to Israel. There were frequent wars between the two nations. Edom cheered those who attacked God’s people (Ps 137:7; Obadiah). Amalek, Esau’s grandson (36:12), became the founder of a people who were a perennial enemy of Israel (Exod 17:8-16). There is a repeated emphasis in Genesis 36, that Esau is Edom (36:1, 8, 9, 19, and 43). The significance of this otherwise unnecessary repetition seems to be that God wanted His people to see what results when a man lives apart from Him. From this one man, Esau, an outwardly good man, a likable man, a successful man from the world’s perspective, came the godless nation Edom, which often plagued the people of God. So God says, “Remember: Esau is Edom!”

**4. Temporal fame does not equal eternal recognition by God (37:1).** Moses writes, “Now Jacob lived in the land where his father had sojourned, in the land of Canaan” (37:1). While Esau was out conquering the land of Edom, founding a nation, fathering kings, and making a great worldly success of himself, Jacob was quietly living in a land he didn’t even own, the land where his fathers had sojourned. While Esau’s descendants were mighty chieftains, famous in their day, Jacob’s descendants were down in Egypt, enslaved to Pharaoh. By Moses’ day (over 400 years later), Israel was a fledgling nation of slaves, recently escaped from Egypt, owning no land of their own. Edom was an established kingdom that had the power to refuse Israel passage over their land. But this tour through Genesis 36 shows us that God, not man, writes the final chapter of history. These once-famous names don’t mean a thing to our world today, but Israel’s name is in the news almost daily. These men, successful by the world’s measure, passed off the scene and were soon forgotten as others clamored to take their place. Today, we don’t know anything more about them than is written here. Fame is a fleeting thing. The Edomite race endured until the time of Christ, when they were known as Idumeans. They disappeared from history in A.D. 70, when Jerusalem was destroyed.

What really matters is recognition by God, not by this world. We live in a culture that worships fame. If an athlete, a musician, or an actor or actress becomes a Christian, we rush his life story into print and hustle him onto the TV talk shows. The guy may be a babe in Christ, who doesn’t know anything about the Bible, but we listen to his every word as if he’s a spiritual authority. But the recognition that counts will come soon, when we stand before the Lord Jesus Christ and hear Him say, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master” (Matt 25:21, 23). In that day, real success and failure will be unveiled. Until that time, we should be careful to not make a big deal about earthly success or failure. Only God knows who is truly successful and who is not (1 Cor 4:1-5).

What are we to make of Esau? The Hebrew writer provides this commentary on Esau's fateful decision: "See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears" (Heb 12:15-17).<sup>8</sup>

Most exegetes who discuss the matter believe that Esau was an unbelieving, lost soul. The main reason is found in the passage already cited in Hebrews. But the question is: Does this refer to Esau's entire life? Is it his life epitaph? Or does it apply to the event early in his life when he sold his birthright and lost his blessing—a time when his life was characterized by immorality and unholy conduct. As to the famous statement quoted in Rom 9:13: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated," which Paul uses to illustrate God's sovereign choice of Jacob over Esau, it must be remembered that this is a quotation from Mal 1:2-3, which is a centuries-later oracle of judgment against the Edomites for their abuse of Israel.<sup>9</sup>

When everything is considered, I think it is quite possible that Esau indeed became a believer. After his 20-year separation from Jacob, Esau manifested supernatural love and forgiveness. One day the second tablet of the law would be summed up by a call to love your neighbor as you love yourself (Lev 19:18), and here Esau appeared to be doing just that. Perhaps it was because he had first come to love God.

If this is so, this passage becomes even more applicable. Whether you are a believer or an unbeliever, it is possible to waste your life. That's why it is so important to ask yourself the question, "What am I living for?" What a shame to live your life like Esau, wondering, "What if ...?" While we still live, we all have a choice: to join Jacob and his descendants in waiting patiently for God to fulfill His covenant promises to us, as we labor for His coming kingdom, or to look over at Esau, prospering in the world, and join him in the pursuit of secular success. If we succeed by worldly standards but fail with God, we have failed where it really matters. Whether we fail or succeed by worldly standards, if we succeed with God, we will have true and lasting success. You are writing history. Every day you live, the choices you make, the things you say, and the actions you take are becoming a part of history. You are influencing the eternal destiny of others (one way or the other). How you conduct yourself in your marriage, with your children, in your work, and in the community is incredibly important! You are leaving a legacy for those who will follow in your steps (Prov 20:7). I urge you, please live your life with eternity in mind (Eph 5:15-16).

#### **Additional Lessons from Esau's Family Tree:**

- Your life matters to God (Matt 10:29-31).
- There is a high price for spiritual compromise (Gal 6:7-8).
- You can forfeit blessings that could have been yours (Gen 25:29-34; cf 2 John 8).
- Patience while others prosper is a demonstration of faithfulness.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In the early first century, there was no attempt by any to rebut the claim that Jesus was a descendant of David. There were clear records kept until A.D. 70 and the destruction of Jerusalem. Even with the excess of their malice against Christ and his followers; and because they did not do it, we may safely assert no Jew could do it. Thus the foundation stands as sure today.

<sup>2</sup> Three of these purposes (1, 2, and 4) have been revised from Bob Hallman, *Esau's Family Tree* (Genesis 36:1-43): [http://www3.calvarychapel.com/kauai/teachings/genesis\\_pdf/gen\\_36\\_notes.pdf](http://www3.calvarychapel.com/kauai/teachings/genesis_pdf/gen_36_notes.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> For this sermon, I leaned heavily on the principles and insights of Steven J. Cole, *A Successful Man who Failed with God* (Genesis 36:1-43): <http://www.fcfoonline.org/site/content/1/sermons/051197m.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Their names present a problem, in that the names given in earlier chapters do not correspond with the names listed here. In 26:34, it is said that Esau married Judith, daughter of Beeri the Hittite and Basemath, the daughter of Elon the Hittite. In 28:9, it reports that he added Mahalath, daughter of Ishmael, sister of Nabaioth. But in 36:2-3, different daughters' names are connected with each father. The best solution to this problem is that the wives probably took different names, either when they moved from Canaan to Edom, or with changes in them over time (a common practice; Esau became known as "Red" ["Edom"] over the incident with the red stew which he traded for his birthright.)

<sup>5</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning & Blessing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 428.

<sup>6</sup> Edom and the Edomites are mentioned over 130 times in the Bible. They were an important group of "neighbors" to Israel. When the Israelites came through the wilderness to the Promised Land in the time of Moses, the Edomites refused them passage through their land (Num 20:21). This was a source of great discouragement for the nation (Num 21:4). Even so, God commanded special treatment for the Edomites among Israel: You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother (Deut 23:7). Several of the prophets spoke about and against Edom, including Jeremiah (Jer 49:17-18) and Ezekiel (Ezek 25:12-14). From the time Islam conquered the Middle East, the region has been virtually unoccupied in fulfillment of God's predictions through the prophet Obadiah.

<sup>7</sup> Critics leap upon this verse as proof that Genesis must have been written after the beginning of the monarchy, some 300 years after Moses. But in the previous chapter, God had prophesied to Jacob that kings would come forth from him (35:11), a promise that had also been made to Abraham (17:6, 16).

<sup>8</sup> In personal email correspondence, Dr. Barry Davis, asks the following question: Does "finding no place for repentance" mean (1) "within himself" (i.e., that Esau could not bring himself to fully regret his actions and thus to change his behavior), (2) "within God" (i.e., that Esau sought for God to change His mind re: Esau's right to birthright privileges, but God would not do so), or (3) "with Isaac" (i.e., that Esau wanted Isaac to change his mind regarding rejecting him [Esau] from inheriting the blessing associated with the birthright)?

<sup>9</sup> Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning & Blessing*, 430.